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How I Got To South East Asia

By Steve Littlefield with photos from the author

Well, I know the answer to that of course; it is the way most of us did, via Travis Air Plane Patch. But what about the process that led up to it? For me it began four days after I graduated from Merrimack Valley High School in Penacook, New Hampshire in June of 1970. I went to Lackland AFB for basic training, like all enlisted guys. Basic was interesting to say the least for a 17 year old, but I survived. Then up to Lowry AFB in Denver for Intelligence School. I was supposed to go to Photo Interpreter (PI) School, but when the group that I was in first met, we were informed that we would be sent to the Intelligence Operations School. That was fine for me, as the PI school was 16 weeks long, with another 2 weeks of SAC or TAC Radar Prediction School. Our school was all of 6 weeks long.

My first assignment was to the 68th Bomb Wing at Seymour Johnson in Goldsboro, North Carolina as an Air Intelligence Operations Specialist. That was a great experience in the career field and I met and worked for some fantastic guys, but I just wasn't happy there. Also, I had volunteered for the Air Force knowing full well that the war was going strong, and I felt that I belonged there. So about 6 months after I arrived at Seymour, I put in a "Dream Sheet" for Vietnam. I never even considered Thailand. Well, several months later, the administrative supervisor came into our office with a set of orders with my name on them for Cam Ranh Bay, several months down the road.

I went about business as usual during the interim. I went on leave back home to Penacook at one point, and when I came back, my roommate met me at the barracks with news that yes, orders to Vietnam! Except this time it was to Phan Rang, if my memory is right - and there is no guarantee that my memory is correct.

Anyway, somewhere along the line someone showed me a copy of an *Air Force Times* and about all I can remember was that they, the powers that be, wanted intelligence specialists for some semi-secret job, which involved flying in C-130s. I knew nothing about the job, but someone thought it might have been the guys who hung out the back end of the AC-130 gunships, looking for AAA. I thought that

sounded like fun and I sent in my papers. A few weeks or so later, I got one more set of orders. These were to the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron at Udorn, Thailand. Talk about happy, but I still had no idea what my job would be. Finally, I ran across someone who knew about the squadron.



Recent photo of author Steve Littlefield.

He was not sure what I would be doing, but hanging out the back would not be any of my duties. Little did he know that eventually, part of my duties would include opening the rear paratroop door and capsule door, jumping out and putting out a ladder so some high-ranking Cambodian Air Force officer could come aboard our aircraft after we semi-combat assaulted into Phnom Penh. But the best part was when we would RTB there at the end of the mission. I would open the capsule door and paratroop door and jump out at about the same time the aircraft commander would be advancing the throttles. No messing around with the ladder! But I am getting ahead of myself.

And so, like just about everyone else on flight orders to SEA, I went to Water Survival School down in Homestead AFB, Florida. That was one fun school and was the easiest survival school I would attend. There were a couple of classes and then they took us out into Biscayne Bay, which is very close to being part of the Atlantic Ocean. The first thing we did was parasail. This was

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to teach us what it would be like to parachute into the ocean and show us what to do afterwards. Now, you have to understand, this future aviator was afraid of heights! We had been told in the classroom how to check the parachute and unlatch the covers over the riser releases, all of the important things to do when you hit the water and NOT before! They told the story of a young person who thought he was about to hit the water, so he released his chute. Unfortunately he was quite a distance from the wet landing! He was not hurt badly, but was very embarrassed!

It was time to get airborne. I wanted to be one of the first, so I could get it over with. We were on what they called a Mike-Boat, which was an old Infantry landing craft (like the ones used to invade Normandy), except there was a deck where the troops stood. There was also a tie down, so that the long rope from a speed boat would be tied to this tie down and a short bridle up to the parachute harness. This bridle had two short handles that the student would push once airborne so that he could go free from the tow line and float into the water. When my turn came, I had a death grip on the risers! I gave the signal that I was ready and a crewman threw the handle so the speed boat could go and I would rise up in the air. The instructions were to "just start walking." I expected that I would be in the air about the time I got to the end of the deck. Not to be. After about two steps I was airborne and scared to death!

My grip was even tighter now because I knew that if I let go the parachute would go with it and I would get the chance to exhibit my non-existent diving abilities. So, up I went, higher and higher. Finally, someone on the speed boat waved his flag back and forth. That was the signal to do the safety checks that I would perform if I was unfortunate enough to have to leave the C-130. The first thing was to push against the rear risers to look for any tears. There were none. Then I was to simulate making what is called the "4 line cut." Like I was going to cut a perfectly good Air Force parachute! But that would help with steering if the chute was good. For me, the next part was the hardest. I had to put my left arm through the right riser and reach up and open the cover where the chute attaches to the harness. If the parachute was not packed properly, when the cover was released the riser could spring loose. I did it; to my relief, all went well and with the other riser cover as well.

I thought this wasn't bad. Now I had to really release the tow line. This put me back in the mindset that I knew that as soon as I pushed those handles holding the bridle to the harness, I would fall. But, somehow, I pushed them and the tow line fell away. What a fantastic feeling it was, floating down into the water. I did not want it to end, but of course it did, and under water Steve went! My training took over. I had popped the releases as I hit the water. Away went the parachute and I was floating, thanks to my Mae West. The next job was to climb into the one-man life raft that someone dropped off from the safety boat. That was a little rough, but I made it and I floated in the ocean. I know, it was a tough job, but someone had to do it.

After about 20 to 30 minutes, I heard a helicopter approach

and I looked up to see the HH-3, Jolly Green Giant hover overhead. It dropped the jungle penetrator to me; I got on, pulled the strap around me, gave the signal, and it was time for my short ride to the edge of the cargo door. We were told beforehand that we would get the ride to the edge of the cargo door and back to the water, to see what a pickup would be like. This way, they could give all students the experience. I was in the water for a few minutes and the safety boat came by, picked me up, and brought me back to the Mike Boat. Once everyone went through this part of the training, anybody who was interested could do it one more time. Everybody went. They knew we would. This time, the fear was gone, and once in the water, instead of being in the one-man raft, the group was divided in two and we climbed aboard a 12-man raft to lounge around again. There were other training evolutions we went through, but nothing to compare to the parasailing. My first training class was over and I was one step closer to Udorn, but I still was not sure what I would be doing when I got there.

I returned to Seymour Johnson for a month or so, and then it was up to Shaw AFB in Myrtle Beach, SC, to the Air Force physiology class, better known as the altitude chamber. This training was mostly classroom. About all I can remember about the class is Boyle's law of gaseous diffusion. I think it basically says that the higher in altitude one goes, the more the gas in your body expands. There are several ramifications to this, but the most noticeable was the smell in the gas, meaning altitude chamber! It was one thing you had no control over. They also taught the dangers of not having oxygen above a certain altitude. Among a couple of things that can happen is that a person not on oxygen, or a person having a defective oxygen system, will eventually pass out and possibly die. There are several symptoms before it gets bad, and we received the training to recognize these signs. Of course, the best way to show these is to have a "volunteer" go off oxygen as the altitude is increased. As usual, there were no volunteers, so they did it the old fashioned way; they picked the junior man. Since the majority, if not all, of the trainees had some type of gold or silver on their shoulders, I stuck out with those 2 stripes! So, I graciously volunteered.

There wasn't much to it. Everyone got on oxygen, and after all the systems were checked the door was closed and they did whatever their magic was, and up in altitude we went. It was a little hard getting used to the mask, but I eventually did. They took us up to a simulated 43,000 feet and had me take off the mask. I guess they wanted to show the effects really quickly! Well, they had me hold a child's plastic ball, with different designs cut out of it. I was supposed to put the pieces back into it. I did really well at first and didn't notice a thing. It got a little harder. Then, according to what they told me, I just sat there, sort of giggled, and tried to juggle the ball! At that point the Instructor had me go back on oxygen. According to the Instructor, I was on oxygen, but I didn't look too good. What had happened was that one of the guys who sat next to me had turned off the system when I went off the oxygen, so there was none flowing to me! Fortunately the Instructor came over and got it turned on correctly. They brought the

Continued on next page.

altitude back to around 20,000 feet and everyone else went off to see what their reaction would be. It was very instructive.

That was pretty much the extent of the course for the enlisted and those who would not be flying in high performance aircraft. Those guys also had a short bit of instruction on the ejection seat operation. After the lecture they all got a couple of rides up the rails. That looked like a lot of fun, so I asked if I could get a ride as well. Apparently it was not a big deal, so I got to see what it was like. Sure was one kick in the butt, a lot like the old E-Ticket rides at Disney World!

I went back to Seymour Johnson to await my trip out to Fairchild AFB in Spokane, Washington for the infamous survival school. Everyone had heard horror stories about that school, and most of them came true. At the time the school was classified as Secret, if I remember, as there were some very sensitive matters discussed. Many things have been written about the school over the years, but I will give a brief description of what the school was about. The first few days were classroom lectures, and thrown in for good measure was a recap of how to work the survival radio that I had learned about down in Homestead. We learned how to land after parachuting from an aircraft. We spent several hours jumping into a sawdust pit, hopefully doing it the correct way. We learned if we did it correctly the results were not too bad. Next, they hooked us up to a parachute harness and pulled us up a short distance and let us down at approximately the actual rate of parachute descent. The first time I did pretty well. The next time they turned us around so that we would be landing backwards. Unfortunately, I screwed up. Instead of landing and rolling, I somehow landed standing up straight. The result was screaming pain in my spine...and the pain continues to this day. I knew that if I complained, I would be out of the school and my flight orders cancelled, so I just grinned, dusted myself off, and kept going. I am sure I wasn't the only one.

We had a day or so of more classroom lectures. During the last lecture we were told that the next night would begin the POW phase. One of the things they told us to do was to bring two or three plastic baby bottles, filled with water, into the field with us. In fact, they would sell them to us! We found out that all of the proceeds from the sale would go to a POW/MIA wives outfit. Needless to say, everyone bought a whole lot of bottles and took three along. We told them to re-sell the rest—for the wives. That was where I also bought my POW/MIA bracelet. I didn't know any at the time, so I picked one with that day's date, but 1970. That is why I will always remember the date I went through that training, March 20th!

Now it was out to the field. We knew that after we crawled through the mud and dirt we would be captured and sent to the POW camp. Nobody was in a big hurry. They came out eventually to hunt us down. They sent us into the isolation period for a little over 24 hours. I won't get into much in the way of specifics, as I don't know what is still classified and what isn't, even though I have read articles about our E & E training along with the Navy's course. Suffice to say, that part was absolutely no fun at all! After an interrogation or two, I asked myself the same question I've asked myself a few times during

the next 40 years, "Why did you volunteer for this?" But we all made it through. Next, we were placed into the simulated POW camp. You can kind of think "Hogan's Heroes" with the barracks. In fact, if I remember correctly, the only shelter we had was a cave of some type. I won't say much except that I learned some things that I still remember to this day about leadership. Some of those things I never saw in "the leadership" in the police department where I worked for 26 years.

One example was when they fed us. When I say fed, I am almost exaggerating. The meal consisted of the infamous fish heads and rice. Never had a better meal though! What has stuck with me all these years was what our senior ranking officer (SRO) showed about leadership. The first thing the guards did was to make sure that the officers would be fed first. Well this SRO, and I so wish I could remember his name, was a lieutenant colonel who would, late in the war, fly out of Korat with the new-to-the war A-7Ds. He made it perfectly clear that the enlisted would eat first, even though there were very few of us. When it was apparent that there wasn't enough for everyone, and they were short one ration, he gave his to that person who wouldn't have gotten any.

A short time later he was led away because he was doing his job so well. The group got a little disorderly in protest and paid a price for it. What we did not know was that we had very little time left in the camp and the powers that be wanted to see what would happen after he was removed. Also, he didn't tell us this, the Instructors did. He *still* refused anything we didn't have, even though he was told that his training was over. (As it turned out, when we discovered that his squadron would be in the compound next to ours, a lieutenant whom I was friends with in our POW group and I grabbed several Singhas, went to the colonel's office, reported in a proper manner, and had a few beers with him!) About 30 minutes after this happened the whole camp was called together in formation, and as happened many times, was ordered to bow before the commandant. We did, and after a few seconds we heard the Star Spangled Banner begin to play! No one had to call us to attention, but I would say we all came to a position of attention, and snapped salutes that would have made our basic training DIs proud! That was the end of that portion of our training, an excellent course that none of us will ever forget.

The next and last phase was the actual survival portion. We were each given a potato, a carrot, and a turnip, along with some beef to make beef jerky later. We were also told that if we tried to smuggle any goodies with us they would take an item of food from us. For the most part I don't think anyone bothered, as peer pressure from the group would be enough to play it straight. So, with that, along with some fishing hooks, two parachute panels each for shelter, we boarded buses and were taken out into the woods near the Washington/Idaho border. Also, just before we left, we were told that if we thought things were too bad, there was a Boy Scout camp just down the road where we would be let off!

Once we arrived, we broke into smaller groups and then eventually into two-man teams. I was paired with a 2nd lieutenant navigator. I thought I had hit the jackpot because I

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would have a navigator when it came time for the navigation problems. Wow, was I wrong! We had two navigation courses along with map reading. It was a matter of counting steps and going in the right direction. We did OK during the daytime, but at night, not so well. I kept thinking we had gone the wrong way, but he was the *navigator*. I wonder what he navigated! At least they didn't have to come out and get us.

The rest of the time was pretty much just surviving, and believe me, it was no picnic. Nobody in the group was able to catch a fish, trap or kill any game, and there were no berries to eat in the middle of March. The Instructor was able to show us how to make beef jerky and a couple of other things. We slept on tree boughs and covered up with the parachute panels. It was a little chilly, to be sure. Eventually we were taken back to Fairchild, and since it was Tuesday, it was steak day at the survival school mess hall. Everyone's eyes were much bigger than their stomachs! A lot of steaks were ordered, but few were finished. After four days out in field with little food, it seemed that our stomachs had shrunk. That was pretty much the end of the survival school. We all had one more to go, but that would be at the jungle survival school at Clark AB in the Philippines.

For me, it was a matter of going back to Seymour Johnson in North Carolina, processing out, and going on leave back to New Hampshire. On May 1, 1972 my Dad drove me down to Logan International in Boston where I flew a nonstop flight first class out to San Francisco. Like everyone else, I sat around in a large room waiting for my flight to Clark. I don't remember much about it other than it was crowded. We flew from Travis up to Anchorage, Alaska. We had a short stopover for fuel, then taxied out for takeoff. Once there, we were pushed all the way to the end of the overrun. The pilot set the brakes, went to full power, and that old Trans International Airways stretch DC-8 moaned, rattled, and shook until the aircraft started to roll. The next time I would have a take off like that would be one morning when we left NKP in our over-grossed EC-130 as we had to RON there due to weather at Korat! Our next stop was at Yokota, Japan, and since I had not bothered to get a haircut in a while, I got one there. That was my first experience in getting the Asian neck twist after a haircut!

From there, I and a few others went on to Clark and the survival school. The best part was checking into the visiting airmen's quarters. Against the rear wall was a row of refrigerators, all of them filled with San Miguel beer at a cost of \$.25

per bottle. The first morning, the group gathered in a large classroom. I can't remember who the speaker was, but he started out with the standard welcoming speech. He then asked us to look to our left, then to our right. He told us that of course we would not be shot down, but since one out of three guys going through the school would be shot down, one of those two guys would be the one. Wow, that got everyone's attention.

This course was much different from the other two. We were to have a three-night stay out in the jungle. They told us that unlike what we were told at Fairchild, we could take all of the food we wanted, but there would be more than we could eat out there anyway. Nobody believed that one, yet it turned out to be true! We were taken out to a clearing in the jungle and met by an Instructor and a small guy with a very long and nasty-looking machete. Without going into a long dissertation, the little guy was a native, called a Negrito. They would be helping with the training. Again, not wanting to give away any secrets, they gave us a lot of instruction on hiding in the jungle, how to call in SAR helicopters, staying alive until rescued, etc. It was an excellent school, as were the others. The Air Force does know how to teach its people well. They were right about too much food. I wasn't hungry once out there.

The school finally came to an end and it was time for the C-141 flight over to Korat. Actually, I was supposed to go to Udorn, as the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron was there, but moved down to Korat in the big shuffling of units due to Linebacker. Coincidentally, I had a couple of friends from the intelligence shop in the bomb wing who ended up at Korat about the same time I arrived, because they were sent TDY for operations Linebacker and Linebacker II.

I was very fortunate when I arrived at Korat. As I went into the stifling heat, the intelligence guy whom I was to replace met me, got me settled in at the barracks, and took me to the squadron where everyone treated me like gold. And an interesting squadron it was! Most flying squadrons are commanded by a lieutenant colonel. The commander here was a full colonel, and he had five other full colonels working for him. To say there was a lot

of rank there is an understatement.

So that's the story of how I arrived at Korat Royal Thai Air Base. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed remembering after all these years.



Airman Steve Littlefield—THEN



Expanding the Beachhead

Laos, May 8-15, 2011

By Mac Thompson with photos from the author

I was on the road again to NE Laos for one new school group to work with, a follow-up visit to a couple of completed projects in Xieng Khouang, and an unexpected opportunity to visit Tha Thom. For the second time Sunee was unable to go with me, household and kids' duties at home, so I was thrown back on my old IVS & USAID/Lao language "skills" for the trip, no real problem, been there before, done that. Sunee is hot to trot for the next trip though. Her sister has moved back in with us so she can assume the kid-care and such.

Day One: I was out of the house at Klong 10, NE of Don Muang Airport, at 0400, a bit early, but it provides time to get some things accomplished in Vientiane on arrival. It is about an eight-hour run for me to Nong Khai, including a couple of pit stops and a hotdog break at a 7-11 along the way. It is mostly nice, easy driving since the highway is four to ten lanes all the

way from Bangkok to Nong Khai.

I was met at the Friendship Bridge at Nong Khai by friend Auke Koopmans, a Dutchman who lives in Chiang Mai. He's a "mapmaker" extraordinaire and a real whiz at things related to GPS-ing. Auke had suggested that he come along on the trip since I planned on hitting a couple of roads that he had not yet been on. Since I'm a bit of a map freak, and definitely NOT a

GPS expert, I was happy to have him accompany me. He also picked up a detailed Lao GPS map for me on a micro SD card, baht 1,500 and well worth it, really detailed.

We had dinner and one or three or so Beer Laos that evening at the Khop Chai Deu Restaurant in Vientiane with three motorcycle guys who had just come back from an upcountry "mud run." They had some good tales to relate! One of the guys, Phil G, runs an off-road motorcycle forum out of his place in C. Mai: <http://rideasia.net/forum/>. I do like the bill you get at the Khop Chai Deu Restaurant; it's easy to tell how to pay. When walking back to the hotel we ran into a nice old Buick, probably left over from the "old days."

Day Two: We were on the road to Xaysomboun (XSB), down RT 13S along the Mekong to Tha Bok, then north on the country road up to the Australian run Phu Bia Mine (PBM) junction with the Long Tieng-Sam Thong road, and then east to Xaysomboun town for the night. While this road is just a two-laner, there is some heavy traffic on it as it is the main haul road for shipping the gold and copper ore out to the Mekong. We usually encounter some of their heavy trucks, and this time saw one heading back north to the mine with replacement tires for the high capacity dump trucks they use at the mine. Driving straight through, it is about a four-plus-hour run, but with pit stops and a pho break, make it five hours plus on mostly decent gravel roads. We RONEd, as usual, at the not too bad Phu Bia Hotel, which at least has hot water and sit-down crappers, really great for my knees. Dinner that evening at the market area was rice and fish, chicken, veggies, good eats, and a Beer Lao.

At Khang Don Primary School, in Nong Pet. Ethnic Hmong children



See **MAC**, continued on page 6.

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Examples:

Dues	Student Assistance Fund
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Reunion 2012: San Antonio, Texas

TLCB tax return and board minutes: On web site, in *members only* section. Password: Eliane

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Day Three: We met up early with Mr. Bounkeo, the chief of the Xaysomboun district education office, whom I had met back in December when we did a survey of the schools 25-30 km east at the Moung Om area. Their felt need is for school furniture, especially for several school rooms that have none, thus requiring students to double up in a furnished room. In a couple of cases, this resulted in 70+ students per room, and in another instance, double shifting the students, morning and afternoon, which is not a good solution.

We had earlier listed the priorities for TLCB assistance and after agreeing on the school that would receive the furniture funding, I handed over kip 21 million, a decent-sized bundle, equivalent to about \$2,600. A good portion of this funding was contributed by Pat and Eric Lohry who donated \$5,000 to



Elephant along the road to Long Tieng: Mac's first in this part of Laos.

the Assistance Fund. The balance of the funds was used for two projects in Xieng Khouang Province.

Since Bounkeo and I had already visited the school designated for the assistance in December, there was no need to go again. We did, however, visit the proposed furniture contractor. I had some price questions for him so he pulled out earlier purchase orders from the district for identical furniture that showed the same costs as we were getting. OK, at least no price inflation just for us.

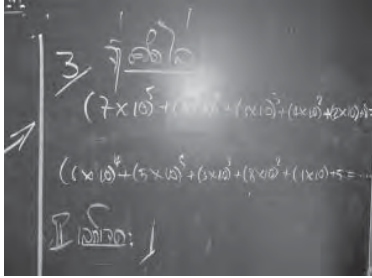
We finished up before noon so Auke and I decided to head on up to Phonsavanh, via Long Tieng (LT), Sam Thong, Tha Tham Bleung, and on to the PDJ at Lat Khay. (Check out various Lima Sites at "Dusty" Jim Henthorn's MapScan project: <http://www.nexus.net/~911gfx/sea-ao.html>, the area is on map sheet NE48-01. The track also shows up fairly well on Google Earth; start with a search for "long tieng").

The road from XSB to the PBM junction and up to Long Tieng has been improved, at least a little bit. We made it to Long Tieng in just 2 hours 15 minutes, much better than when we went up there in February 2008 with Bill Tilton and John and Nancy Sweet. That trip was a butt buster! We passed a working elephant striding along the road, first one I have encountered up in that area. I didn't know they had any there. We stopped at LT for a pho break and ran into Ajan O-Roth, the principal of the LT secondary school. We had a bit of a chat with him, then went on to visit the new combined primary and secondary school project that is just about complete. The contractor for this job is Vietnamese, of all things, especially

Continued next page.

at Long Tieng.

We went on to Sam Thong where I had been with USAID during the spring of 1969, a busy time for me. It is a quiet, sleepy village these days. We stopped at the primary school for a chat with the teachers and a couple of photos of the kids. Note the algebra lesson on the blackboard; and this in primary



school! We rode on up to the PDJ and to Phonsavanh for the RON.

Day Four: We had something of a morning off this day as we were not scheduled to pick up Art Crisfield until the afternoon plane from Vientiane. Art is our TLCB guy

in Vientiane who has been working with us for the last couple of years on these projects. He is a long-time resident in Laos, super Lao speaker, reader and writer. Not like me, but I do manage to muddle along OK.

Auke and I headed up on a back country road north of Moung Soui to the Nam Khan River, which runs west there all the way to Luang Prabang. I had last been in here, LS-261, in the spring of 1969, but that time via a CASI Pilatus Porter. It is really a nice quiet place, no electricity except what they generate themselves by small water-powered turbines in the river, a good concept. (photo below)



There is a small ferry crossing there for pickups and it is possible, at least in the dry season, to drive on to Luang Prabang, about six hours or so west. Gotta try that one day!

We headed back to Phonsavanh airport, picked up Art, and then went to the Provincial Education Office to present

TLCB "thank you" certificates to Mr. Soudeuan, the guy we normally work with, and his boss, Mr. Boualy, who allows Soudeuan the flexibility to assist us.



Reception at Khang Don Primary School in Nong Pet. Fancy Hmong clothes are worn only on special occasions.

Day Five: With Art and Soudeuan, we were off 25 km east to Nong Pet and the Khang Don Primary School where the TLCB funded a new library-meeting room. This project of about \$2,000 was actually funded by Pat and Eric Lohry's donation. This school of 271 students is about 95% Hmong. We were met by a good bunch of them at the gate, all suited up in their finery, along with two students playing their Hmong Khene pipes. We attended a meeting in the new library, which looks very nice and is well built; we then went out for a walk around

Below, "our" library at Khang Don Primary School..



See MAC, continued on page 8

MAC, continued from page 7.

the school grounds. There was a Baci ceremony, along with the obligatory glass of lao Lao. UGH!! I hate that moonshine stuff. We shared a mid-morning meal and a cultural show by the students, which was followed by a round of lamvong dancing by the students, teachers, and of course by popular

one room had a wallboard display of native bugs and leaves, both edible and medicinal, collected and prepared by the kids. After a group meeting, we had another lunch and lao Lao, and another good cultural show, this one being by ethnic Phuan, another type of lowland Lao.

We went back to the guest house and another lao Lao induced nap. We enjoyed dinner that evening at the Craters Restaurant, run by a Vietnamese family, nice folks who have been there about two years now. Dad



Auke has strings tied around his wrist as he, Mac, and Art enjoy a traditional "Baci" ceremony, above, and then are drawn into the local dancing, below and on page 15.



Above, the family-run Craters Restaurant in Phonsavanh, a favorite with Mac and friends.



is the boss, part-time waiter, and speaks French. Mom is the cook, and their son, who goes to a local Lao primary school in Phonsavanh, is part-time waiter and Lao translator. Their niece, who they brought in from the Vinh area, is the waitress and English translator.

Day Six: We thought we were about finished for this trip, but Soundeuan had finally made contact with the school people down south in the Tha Thom District where we had tried to go last December but were "muddied" out after just 2-3

Below is a typical hotel lobby display of UXO (unexploded ordnance). This is in Phonsavanh.

demand, us. After all that, we went back to our digs to nap off the lao Lao.

In the afternoon, we had a follow up visit to Phou Kout District, west of Phonsavanh, and up the road to the Naxaythong Primary School, where we had funded a new roof, again with the \$2,000 for this one coming from the Pat and Eric Lohry donation. The school principal and *nai ban*, the "village chief" at this site are well engaged with efforts to fix up their school. There has been no problem at all in drumming up interest on the part of the villagers for work. A plus is that the teachers appear to be better at teaching than at many schools we have visited. For example, here,



see MAC, continued on page 14

War comes to Dong Hene Cluster

Memories of my First Foreign Service Assignment, Part I

By Jack Huxtable with photos by the author

All things considered, my first tour of duty as a Foreign Service Officer in Laos can only be described as an incredible experience. My assignment with the Agency for International Development (USAID) at age 28 began in January 1966 in a remote village near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The job was just what I wanted. It featured close association with villagers and lots of field work. Eighteen months into the program I married Marge Balfe, a USAID nurse who was working next door in Vietnam. We evaluated all aspects of our situation and decided to settle into the austere and sometimes unsafe village where I had started.

This story is not meant to document the secret war in Laos or the international political situation at the time. That has been done by many others. The intention here is to describe the development landscape, our personal lives, and how we faced several challenging events during those initial 24 months.

While writing this account, I wondered if anyone would believe we lived and worked in such an insecure environment. Looking back on the situation 44 years later, Marge and I ask ourselves how we could have chosen to continue given the precarious conditions. The simple answer may be that we enjoyed the work, trusted the villagers, and believed our development efforts would bear fruit. In fact, we were really all in denial now that we know how it all ended. Events that might easily have brought the program to a halt included:

- 1) A Pathet Lao bus ambush that occurred 6 miles from my house only a month after I arrived in Dong Hene
- 2) A mistaken U.S. Air force bombing that nearly wiped out the village of Muang Phalane
- 3) An enemy strike in the village of Pakannya that killed our work colleague, Fred Cheydleur and his assistant, Chantay
- 4) Our narrow escape from death on Christmas Eve, when enemy forces killed two American technicians and several Lao at the secret radar station
- 5) Our hasty evacuation from the village of Lahanam, just hours before PL enemy forces came in the village to capture or kill us.

A few years ago my sister, Hope, handed me a pack of our letters that she saved from that period. In 2011, after re-reading the letters and reviewing a few dusty, 44-year-old monthly reports, I have tried to reconstruct those memorable days.

THE LAO LAYOUT

Preparing for USAID Laos required completing three months of area studies and cultural/political orientation at the University of California at Berkley, followed by six months of intensive language instruction at FSI. Our training group included 30 officers for both Thailand and Laos with several like me who had completed overseas assignments in the Peace Corps. In spite of all the preparation, I still remember being amazed at the projects underway and the size of the U.S. Mission when I arrived in Vientiane. How could Ambassador William Sullivan keep track of all those agencies, including the vast number of their programs and employees? How could the Royal Lao Government absorb all the aid? Besides Embassy, USAID, and USIS agencies, the Ambassador's responsibility

included oversight of hundreds of DOD and CIA personnel, regular and undercover, located in six provincial areas of the country. He knew from his experience negotiating the Geneva Accords in 1962, that the U.S. had agreed on the neutrality of Laos. This meant strict limits on the number of military personnel allowed in the country.

The International Control Commission (ICC) was flying its Indian, Polish, and Canadian personnel around in big, white helicopters to make sure the Accords were being adhered to. I'm sure it was a challenging task for the country team to find non-military labels for all the jobs required. At least 60 International Voluntary Service (IVS) volunteers were working in remote places in the countryside as well. USAID/Laos with all its contractors was the second largest mission in the world, surpassed only by Vietnam. In addition to Community Development, there were many other "advisors" to win the hearts and minds of Lao people. We were leaving no stones unturned in "*containing Communism*," I thought.

How did our massive engagement in tiny Laos get started? Five years prior on March 9, 1961, President Kennedy signed a National Security Action Memo, number 29, which began a series of important events. The President's decision authorized the CIA to initiate important actions designed to strengthen pro-U.S. Lao forces, including both combat and supply functions. The document, and its list of 17 instructions which remained classified until the 1990s, gave the go-ahead for the CIA's Civil Air Transport to move supplies both into and within Laos by aircraft and helicopter.

CLUSTER EFFORTS

I first met Dr. Howard Thomas in 1961 at Cornell, where he was a rural sociology professor. We met again in 1965 when he came to our USC Berkeley training session to represent the USAID/ Laos Rural Development Division. He told us that community development in Laos was following a strategy called the Cluster Concept. He said we would be surveying felt needs, developing plans with local leaders, and starting small projects, hoping that villager enthusiasm would spread. Enthusiastic villagers would support the Lao government, Souvanna Phouma, and overall efforts to contain Communism. Vang Vieng, Phone Hong, Paksane, Thakek, Kengkok, Ban Houei Sai, and Dong Hene were cited as either on-going or prospective *cluster areas*. He emphasized that we would all be working in safe areas and would be connected by radio communication and that any of us could be evacuated from our post by helicopter, just in case!

See **Dong Hene**, continued on page 10.

Dr. Thomas and his wife, Ruth, met me a third time at Wat-tay Airport when I landed in Vientiane on January 5, 1966. I told them about my long trip, which began from our dairy farm near Richfield Springs, NY. It included a two-day stop in London and a two-week visit to Rezaiyeh, Iran, where I had worked from 1962-1964 as a Peace Corps Volunteer. My first letter home from Laos the next day, January 6, contained a description of the familiar train/bus ride from Tehran to Rezaiyeh, my stay with Iranian friends, Baba and and Motahram Jehangiri, and a New Year's Eve party at the Turkish Consulate.

Safe and sound in Vientiane, I settled into the USAID Nahai Dio Guest house and got ready for a round of more orientation meetings, get-acquainted social gatherings, and field visits. How quiet it seemed in downtown Vientiane! Traffic was light and few places had electric power. At dusk you could smell the smoke from cooking fires. I went to the morning market in a samlaw (pedicab) by myself to confirm that my language was working. From a few previous associations, notably Khamsing Rajamountry, I already knew that I would like the Lao people. Now, with a few street conversations under my belt, those sentiments were confirmed.

Traveling outside of town my enthusiasm grew even more. On January 16, 1966, I described my first field trip to the boonies. What excitement! Tony Cauterucci and I flew to a place called Ban Houei Sai (BHS), where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Burma, now known as Myanmar, meet. The mode of transport was by a plane called the Caribou. USAID's representative, Joe Flipsi, and a couple of body guards met us at the dirt strip along the Mekong River. The guards had weapons and Joe was carrying a handy-talkie radio. Wow, I said to myself, "If this is going to be Tony's cluster posting, I wonder what mine will be like." How the Rural Development Division decided on field assignments for our group was a mystery. I was sure, at the time, that my status as single and male entered into the decision process.

We toured the town, saw its famous 1880 French Colonial Headquarters, Fort Carnot, sampled some white lightning (lao Lao), and heard many interesting stories about operations in BHS. Joe told us something, but not everything, about some famous CIA warriors, Tony Poe and Bill Young, and their operations at Nam You.

In my letter, I noted our \$60 million annual USAID/Lao expenditure and compared it to the total Lao Budget of only \$8 million. I also talked about a session with Loren Haffner of the Rural Development Division, who described the Forward Area Program and my assignment to Dong Hene Cluster. He said young volunteers were working in remote areas, often connected with headquarters only by an airstrip and a radio. The volunteers were providing villagers with development services they had not had before. He said the cluster program was an extension of the forward area effort. The Dong Hene/Muang Phalane/Pakannya area was one of the largest envisioned. Because three distinct districts were involved, it meant that I would be required to interact with district and military leaders of each. I knew the job would not be easy, but I was motivated, only 28, and ready to go.

DONG HENE BOUND

On February first, I boarded the "milk run," a C-47, and flew to Savannakhet. The USAID Area Coordinator, Aubrey Elliot, briefed me on USAID-funded activities and introduced his local staff. Surprisingly, two important ones included administrative assistants Ms. La and Mr. Dong, who were both Vietnamese nationals. Two Filipinos, Jess and his assistant, ran the motor pool. Khamphet, from Thailand, was the radio operator. Where, I wondered, were the Lao employees? Some Lao spoke French, but not many could use English effectively and not many Americans could communicate in Lao. American staff advisors included Lee Engler, education; Moe Patruno, administration; Ford Anderson, requirements office, and another who worked in agriculture. Finally, I met some of the Lao staff including Bounhom Inthavong, who was working with Lee Engler and Khamhou Srirathanakul and Somphong Phomsamouth, who were to be my faithful Lao assistants. We introduced ourselves, packed a few essentials, and next morning drove to Dong Hene in a 4-wheel drive jeep. We unpacked our belongings in a rented house and soon established a "Cluster Center." Since *dong* in Lao means swale or pond and the word *hene* is civit cat, I translated the name Dong Hene to Civit Cat Pond. The village was located 60 kilometers east of the Mekong River on dusty Rt. 9.

There in our new cluster office/hostel was Geoffrey S. Armour, a USAID forward area worker who was sent out earlier by Col Haffner to test the development waters. Jeff was a huge help in my first few weeks. He introduced me to the District Officer, Khampheuy Souphomphakdy, showed me the path to our bathing area on the Champone River, and helped get the kerosene refrigerator operating. Since we both enjoyed jazz and beer, we tuned our short-wave radio to the Willis Conover Jazz Program, VOA, and established 6 P.M. as our happy hour.

My first letter home from Dong Hene, February 6, 1966, sent birthday greetings to my mother, who was 53 and living with my sister in Vorheesville, NY. I described the bustling village, its naked children, my enjoyable living conditions, and the competent assistants. I noted my initial talks with George Larson, a USAID contract employee, who had worked with Jeff on "forward area activities." The rented office/house was sparse, but it had space on the first floor for project supplies and plenty of living space on the second floor. I remember comparing it to my previous and more luxurious Peace Corps quarters in Iran. Would mosquitoes, heat, no electricity, cold water baths be a problem for me? I soon realized that living with friendly villagers, developing new relationships, and the challenging job would keep me busy and carry me through. Jeff and I both enjoyed playing with the village children. What better way to improve our language we both thought. One boy taught us how to use a bamboo blow-gun. Without TV or other entertainment, we sat around in the early evening shooting geckos, lizards that crawled along the wall.

Another letter home dated February 13, 1966, continued describing the scene; "I have a single-burner kerosene stove but found an excellent houseboy, Sengnguen from the village of Dongkilo just across the bridge, who cooks, launders, and

Continued next page.

cleans the house and yard for \$10/month. Another village boy hauls water for bathing at 10 cents a cart load. There are no car fumes or honking horns, just the rustle of palm fronds and an occasional thud when a coconut hits the ground." The same letter contained other news. Marge Balfe had written me a note saying that 16 inches of snow fell in Washington, D.C. and that my brother, Bill, 20, was busy in Logan, Utah in a Peace Corps Training Program. He was destined for Iran. I was excited to hear about Bill's assignment and made arrangements with friends to greet him in Teheran. By this time, Marge, who was a student at Georgetown University, was also writing to my sister Hope. On February 20, Marge said that Bill was on his way to Iran.

SECURITY, SECURITY, SECURITY

Meeting local leaders in Dong Hene and introducing the program seemed like a piece of cake. Almost everyone was enthused about the prospects for gaining access to clean water, improved health facilities, and repaired or new schools. Since Lao government operating budgets were almost non-existent, it meant that district leaders had no real operating money or transport facilities. On the other hand, here were youthful foreigners setting up a well-stocked development office, driving around in jeeps, while the local leaders had none. This visible reality and our inability to provide them with wheels did eventually become somewhat awkward if not downright difficult.

Security was on everyone's mind. The FAR Military Commander, Col Thao Ly, and his troops were posted in what was previously known as the Officer's Training School just on the edge of the village. He assured us the Dong Hene area was safe. In his briefing, Col Ly left out the story of a battle between FAR troops and North Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao that took place right there in Dong Hene two years earlier. According to Haffner, a former U.S. Marine Corps colonel who kept his ears to the ground, a mass grave containing 20 or more bodies from that battle was located at the football field in front of the military compound.



Curious rumors about the bad guys were heard on Main Street, in the market, and at bathing time on the banks of the Champhone River. It was necessary to stay tuned. A serious security incident that was cause for major concern occurred that March. Just two months after I arrived in Dong Hene, a passenger bus was ambushed on the jungle trail 10 kilometers north

District Chief Phao, left, with Col Thao Ly in 1966.

of town. Twenty seven people were killed or wounded. The site was only 6 miles away from where Jeff and I were sleeping! After talking with police, military, and civilian



leaders, we reported the tragic event to headquarters. We consulted with USAID'S Area Coordinator in Savannakhet. He assured USAID Vientiane that we had confidence in our local security and that we could continue. I'm sure we reported the incident, but we were careful about expressing anxiety up the line. No one, including me specifically, wanted to press the brakes or diminish our efforts underway.

Realizing the need for extra vigilance regarding our safety, Jeff and I began to limit our exposure to other villages and monitor the situation more closely. We started the generator for radio check with headquarters twice daily. Presumably, someone in our bureaucracy would tell us if the overall state of affairs was changing. We decided that an effective way to find out the good and bad news of the area was to sit around and chit-chat with neighbors. Somphong and Khamhou were both outsiders and realized the importance of information gathering. They met effectively with villagers, non-stop, attended bouns (village festivals), and showed popular USIS supplied movies. Jeff and I stayed put for about six weeks, improving our Lao language capability and digging a badly needed well in the back yard. The well job became a learning exercise for us as well as all those who watched. A young boy named Bounyeang helped dig the hole, haul the gravel, mix the cement, and pour the well rings. Once each ring was formed, we lowered it into the well using our jeep's cable and winch

I did not want to alarm anyone on the home front about our deteriorating situation either. On March 8, after the bus ambush I wrote, "Security just north of here is not as good as it was so we don't travel on the roads very much, and only in daylight. One village where our USAID carpenter is building a dispensary is reportedly surrounded by enemy, so I evacuated him. We are in the dry season and the Pathet Lao are on the move."

Care and awareness continued in every way we could think of. We actually considered moving to Savannakhet for a few days, but decided it would raise the alarm too high. Writing home on March 20, I commented, "The generator we have now is too noisy so we use kerosene

See **Dong Hene** continued on page 12.



Bounyeang helps Jack dig badly needed well.

lamps. The rest of the people in town use candles for light. Our house looks bright at night.” I remember we were both concerned about the brightness of our pump-kerosene lantern, since our neighbors had none.

When our boss, Aubrey Elliot, came out to Dong Hene for a visit, he must have made suggestions for improved housekeeping. In my next note home on March 29, I reported, “I am going to get a bigger generator, stove, refrigerator, water-seal toilet and the works.” I noted that very few of the 1,400 people in town had clean toilets or access to clean drinking water.

A poor widow next door had just given birth to twins and was asking for milk. I knew giving anything away in the community was not a good idea, but couldn’t refuse. They were beautiful girls wrapped in burlap. The details escape me now, but I’m sure we found a way to provide her with powdered milk. Thirty years later in 1995, when Marge and I visited Dong Hene, we met another neighbor, Nya Mae Keo, and the twin girls Tuk Savanh and Tavee Keo Manesavanh. Their mother had passed on several years before, but they remembered the story she told of receiving milk from an American. Their older brother, Khamsy, became a FAR soldier in Dong Hene and eventually in 1980, after 4 years in the Ubon Refugee Camp, emigrated to Minneapolis. When I visited Khamsy in 2002, he gave me a 1969 photo of his Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU). They are shown holding a Vietcong boy captured in Ban Kok Kong, a village just south of Dong Hene.

By April the temperature was rising. It was my first hot season in the tropics. Sleeping under a mosquito net without a fan in the 90 degree heat was a challenge. In the still of the night, I remember hearing two new sounds: the seed pods of the overhanging acacia tree popping with an explosive bang when they opened and dropped on the roof and, every now and then after dark, a gecko calling out. They made a kap-kae sounding chirp for seven to ten times. For fun, we counted the chirps in Lao.

Participating in my first Lao New Year Festival required diligence and a willingness to drink white lightning. I had told my assistants, Khamhou and Somphong, of my wish to celebrate with them in the traditional Lao way, but I did not quite realize

it meant drinking Lao non-stop and dancing in the street for several days. In my April 22 note home I complained, “Between regular holidays and special celebrations villagers seem to be coming up with, it’s like pulling teeth to get much work done.” In the same letter I noted that a new IVS mate would be coming to Dong Hene next month.

One day while Jeff and I were drinking coffee at the corner grass-thatched hut, an emergency situation landed on our doorstep. Villagers from Chillamoung, a place 15 km distant, were carrying a badly wounded woman on a bamboo stretcher. They were asking for help. According to the husband, it was a self-inflicted stab wound in her neck. She had given birth only a week earlier. We quickly assembled a mattress in the back of our jeep and drove her, with the bidi cigar-smoking husband, 30 km in to Seno Hospital, where there was a French doctor who was able to save her.

We hoped that the gesture would show other villagers the humanitarian nature of our assistance, but at the same time we were concerned that we would be called upon to provide emergency service on a regular basis. If someone needed emergency help we opened our medical kit. Otherwise, it was important that they be directed to the village medic.

It was some time during my initial few months that a village elder told me a well-known local tale about Dong Hene honey bees. The story was about a skirmish between the PL and FAR troops several years back. Bee hives located somewhere near the village temple were dislodged as a result of the gunfire. Thousands of bees reportedly swarmed, stung the invaders, and played a decisive role in the outcome of the battle. I heard the story from two different sources, so it must be true.

Sanford Stone replaced Aubrey Elliot as USAID’s Area Coordinator sometime in early May. Besides Sandy’s wife, Ruth, the family included her mother and their three children, Audrey, Bruce, and Keven. By May 15, I reported a new IVS volunteer roommate was with me and that I would soon have my household shipment, a trunk which contained my saxophone and a tape recorder! When the sax finally arrived, I laughed and was hesitant to play, but finally broke down to the amusement and amazement of several village children. With the portable tape machine, we initiated sending tapes by APO mail.

The new roommate referred to in my letter turned out to be two new volunteers fresh from the States. Lew Sitzer, 21, a student from California, who had been to Mississippi in 1964, “To see first-hand what the struggle for black Americans—and all Americans—meant.” Fred Cheydeur, 19, was from Jenkintown, PA, and did not want any part of the war in Vietnam, but was ready to sacrifice time and energy to help the Lao. Their eager Lao assistants arrived soon, too. Chanty was assigned with Fred, and Prasert Vongsila worked with Lew. I was enthused to have Lew and Fred and their Lao co-workers on board. After some intensive training in Vientiane, both volunteers were already speaking reasonable Lao. They were anxious to get established in separate villages and their own jobs.

Continued next page.

SELF HELP

The concept of self help was easy to translate. It meant that villagers would provide what they already had plenty of: labor, sand, gravel, and a few hand tools. In short order a few simple, self-help activities were underway. The dirt floor of the Dong Hene Market was paved with concrete. Local teachers were managing school repairs. A well-digging program that used portable forms for the concrete rings that lined the well was popular. Construction of a medical dispensary began. By cooperating and actually working on these projects, villagers knew, if they thought about it, that they were demonstrating support for the district and central governments. They generally understood too, that anyone or any entity, showing pro-government sentiments would be a target for harassment from the Pathet Lao (Aye-Nong). Did we talk about the program in these terms? Among ourselves, yes, but I don't think we spent a lot of time on the subject.

Tragic news came from home when I checked in by radio on June 6. My 31-year-old brother, Jim, had died in New York City. Sandy Stone, area coordinator, sent a chopper and I began the long flight back to Richfield Springs. When he received word in Karaj, Iran, brother Bill remembers that the message was garbled. Until he arrived in New York where he could call home, he supposed that I was the one dead. Marge came and stayed with us at the Cullen farm for a few days. A day after the memorial service Bill, Marge, and I drove to NYC to bring back Jim's belongings. After a few days on the farm I flew back to Laos and drove out to Dong Hene to continue.

At some point in early summer, my houseboy/cook Siengngun decided he was too busy in his garden and could not work for me any further. I did not want to spend my career cooking or cleaning house so I discussed the matter with Paul Altemus, an IVS teacher with Vietnamese cook connections in Savannakhet. A few days later I found Balai, a Taidam lady, and mother of 6, who needed a job and was willing to move from Seno to Dong Hene. I described her on July 15, 1966 as "a whirlwind

cook, who washes, cleans, and makes our quarters homey." Balai stayed with us for 8 years, in a variety of postings after Marge and I were married in 1967. She emigrated to the U.S. in 1975 and lives today with her family in Grinnell, Iowa.

That same July, when I developed a fever, Jeff took me in to the French-supported hospital in Seno for a week stay. From there I reported being treated like a king. The French physician, Dr. Rolliet, insisted on giving me their luxury suite and I was pleased that our Deputy USAID Director, Peter Cody, came all the way from Vientiane to visit me in the hospital.

In the summer of 1966, two more IVSers arrived. We were joined by a husband-wife team, Larry and Chris Lehman. With their assistants, Chantay, Cheleum, and Kongsy Phasisombath, our development team now totaled 9. Their youth, volunteer status, and especially their ability with the language made them instantly popular among villagers. Strapping, nineteen-year-old Fred amazed everyone by lifting a 55 gallon drum of kerosene from the ground to the back of a pick-up truck. Lew, a tall, handsome, college graduate from California, was interested in creating a community garden. Larry, Chris, and their assistants were actively engaged in health, home economics, and agriculture activities. Larry and Chris lived on the second floor of Nya Mae Keo's house. She was famous in Dong Hene for her delicious Lao noodles (kaopoun). Since her house was just behind ours, we connected it to our generator. Soon thereafter, we connected the Chao Muang with electricity as well and earned brownie points.

Sometime that summer during a village boun in downtown Dong Hene, a drunken soldier tossed a grenade in our back yard. No one was hurt but the explosion left shrapnel marks on the side of our house. Needless to say, it was an unsettling event. We were quite sure it was a prank, but no one could sleep soundly that night. When I contacted Larry while writing this in 2011, he reminded me how shocked he and Chris were to see those marks and hear the story when they first arrived.

In late August heavy monsoon rains continued to fall bringing the level of the Mekong River higher than had ever been recorded. Vientiane's airport, market, and many foreign embassies were flooded. For three weeks everyone in the U.S. mission concentrated on relief efforts. Air America provided helicopter service between Udorn and That Luang. The living compound at Km-6 was accessible by boat only for several days. From Savannakhet, on September 5, 1966, I wrote that we were temporarily out of air service with the capital but that the flood had not affected our operations. I had enjoyed part of the weekend across the river in Mukdahan, at the U.S. Air Force club, "where we could sip beers and eat turkey." 

To be continued—read more of Jack's adventures in a future issue of *Mekong Express Mail*!

Mekong River flood of 1966. Photo by Bill Tilton.



km on the road. This is an old road, built by the French in the old days and was probably a trail hundreds of years ago, but it is now under a massive upgrading project by a Vietnamese construction company. It leads from the PDJ on south through Tha Vieng, Tha Thom, and on down to Paksane on the Mekong River. It will be almost a super highway, Lao style, when complete. It will be a nice drive if someone has included road maintenance in the national budget, perhaps wishful thinking.



Just two hours down the road, we came to what might have been a dead end. We thought perhaps we were jinxed in our efforts to get to Tha Thom. There was a logging truck dug about three to four feet into the mud and blocking the road. Another truck came along and tried to pull it out. Nope. Someone went back up the road and got a road grader to come down and try a tow. Nope again. By this time there were several pickups and empty trucks backed up at the blockage so the grader operator helped out by blading a bypass, thank you very much. It would have been a two-day haul for us to get back to Vientiane from that spot. We drove to Tha Thom, just two hours on down the road where there are two new guest houses in town, one of which has a sit-down crapper. The cold water shower in May was OK, refreshing.

We went off to the District Education office for a meeting to introduce ourselves, cover the world situation, and see what assistance we might be able to provide. After the meeting, we drove on south about 10 km to the Phon Chalern Primary School for a look-see. The school definitely needs help, including a new roof, full walls, partitions, concrete floor, windows, and doors, indeed, a replacement building. However, we decided to hold off proposing such assistance primarily because this is the first time we have worked in this district.

While discussing the school building, a lady who is deputy village chief pointed out the small building in back where the four to five single teachers, without accommodation in the village, stay. It, too, is in bad shape. The school had already requested funds from the district to replace the teacher's small bunkhouse, but funds are not currently available. However, a local sawmill has agreed to donate lumber for the building, a substantial cost, which was scheduled to be delivered before the end of the month. Later that afternoon and evening after dinner, Art, Mr. Soundeuan, and the school principal huddled for a few hours and came up with a plan and budget for a replacement building with a budget of \$1,400. This has been considered and approved by the TLCB Assistance Committee. We figured that happy teachers make better teachers. We had dinner that evening at a local, and perhaps only, restaurant in town, joined by a couple of the district school officials for more

Continued next page.

Art and Auke, Friends of TLCB

Art Crisfield, an educator extraordinaire, was in Laos pre 1975 for several years working with a USAID contractor developing non-French-style high schools. Post '75, Art spent several years in the Philippines at the U.S.-funded Indochinese Refugee Processing Center in administration, doing cultural orientation tasks. In 1992 he returned to Laos and has been there ever since. For several years he worked with the NGO *World Education*, including much time in Xieng Khouang, which is where he met Mr. Soundeuan, our cooperator up there. Art has worked all over Laos. About four years ago, I had dinner with 4-5 of my AmCit friends there in Laos, all of whom do travel upcountry. I asked them to come up with projects, school, village development, most anything. A year later Art asked if the TLCB could help out with projects in Xieng Khouang working with Soundeuan, and that's where we are now.

I first met **Auke Koopmans** eyeball to eyeball last November. He's Dutch, retired in Thailand, and has a Thai wife. Auke has worked with several international organizations over the years, many of which were in Indonesia and more recently two years in Laos. He's also a dedicated mapmaker, which is how I got interested in him, and where we started emailing. He's not a "biker" but has done so in the past, being a little "mature" these days, although a year or two younger than I. Auke now uses his 4WD pickup for frequent GPS trips to Laos, frequent being much more often than I. Last May I asked if he'd like to go along on the Xaysomboun-Long Tieng-Phonsavanh trip, as it's pretty uncommon for foreigners to be able to do so; seemingly me excepted. He jumped at the chance, so now they've got good GPS profiles for that track.

Mac Thompson

of a “get to know each other” session.

Day Seven: Finished with school business for this trip, it was time to be heading back to Vientiane and back to Thailand. During breakfast at the same restaurant, we heard that there were now some forty (40) loaded logging trucks stuck at the same mud hole we had encountered the day before. FYI, these log trucks are hauling the timber from the forested areas here back up to North Vietnam for processing. I will refrain from commenting on what I think about this.

We were on the good road for 30 minutes and came to a large bridge under construction. The local folks there pointed to a bypass that led to a ford across the river. It had rained some the night before and the bypass itself was a wide mud hole, but our driver and four-wheel drive made it through, and then came to a screeching stop! Looking at the wide river ahead of us, our driver kindly waded across to the channel, which was getting fast and deep, came back to say “no go.” Thinking about the potential for a two-day run to get back to Vientiane, let alone the blockage of the 40 or log trucks up the road, I suggested that he walk back to the bypass where there were several log trucks loading up, and see what it would cost for a tow across.

He did so and it turned out to be just kip 100,000, \$12.50, which I thought was eminently reasonable, considering the alternative of possibly losing the rental pickup or returning to Phonsavan and Vientiane by the long route. Fifteen minutes on down the road we came to another bridge under construction with a bypass and ford, which looked reasonable. The driver walked it initially just to be sure and we crossed to the other side. Another hour on down the road we hit Paksane and the main N-S highway in Laos, Rt 13, and headed west

Art, Mac, and Auke doing their best Hmong dancing.



If this looks familiar, it happened before--Mac getting towed through a river by a logging truck. This adventure saved about two days of roundabout driving.

back to Vientiane.

We arrived in Vientiane at 1400 hours. Art went on home; Auke got his own pickup and decided to spend a couple more days exploring other roads for his mapmaking project, and I headed over to Nong Khai to pick up my van that I had left there. It was too late to drive all the way home by then so I stopped in Khon Kaen for the night at a nice and expensive hotel, with free WiFi. It was walking distance to a monster mall with lots of eateries, so I looked up the Sizzlers outlet and had a good farang dinner.

Day Eight: I woke up early, was out of the hotel at 0530 hours, and on the road back home. I made a couple of pit stops, ate a hotdog again at a 7-11, and arrived back at the house at Klong 10 at 1030 hrs. It was kind of a surprise for Sunee and all as they had expected me late in the afternoon.

In summary, we visited four sites, handed over the funds for furniture for one school in Xaysomboun, visited two completed projects in the Phonsavan area, and made our first ever visit and introduction to Tha Thom District, and agreed to seek funding for one project there. All told, this was a pretty productive trip. The overall travel for this trip was:

- Laos: 1,224 km, or 759 miles
- Thailand: 1,172 km, or 727 miles

Photos for this, and earlier trips, here: <https://picasaweb.google.com/mactbkk/?fgl=true&pli=1&fgl=true>. Note: At the photos, you can click on one, and after a bit, on the right side, the Latitude and Longitude will pop up.



Now to get planning another Lao run!

A Time of Remembrance in Alexandria

by Bob Wheatley

The first of many reunion highlights was a visit Thursday evening to the Vietnam Memorial Wall. There on the knoll overlooking The Wall, we dedicated a memorial wreath to the men of Lima Site 85 and all the others who lost their lives in the Secret War. Despite the drizzling rain showers, our spirits were un-dampened as Bob Wheatley and Les Thompson presented the wreath, which was accepted by Bill Peterson. John Sweet, acting chaplain, offered a prayer. Brother Woody Freeman rendered a solemn and stirring performance with



Board members Les Thompson and Bob Wheatley after placing the memorial wreath at "The Wall," in honor of the LS 85 losses. Photos by Bill Tilton.

his bagpipes. The wreath was set in place before the panel bearing the names of the twelve who lost their lives at Lima Site 85 one fateful morning so long ago on March 11, 1968.

Friday morning we enjoyed a fascinating walking tour of the Pentagon. Our tour guide pointed out that the section that was hit in the attack of 9-11 had been refurbished and reinforced with steel girders just prior to the attack, greatly limiting the damage and deaths. One hundred and twenty-five perished inside the building that day, but had Flight 77 hit any of the other four sides, the plane and fire would have gone clear through to the center court and losses would likely have exceeded those in New York City. During a typical weekday there are about 24,000 people in the Pentagon. After the tour, many of us walked outside to the western end of the building to pay respects at the memorial garden, which was dedicated September 11, 2008.

Friday afternoon saw many of us board buses to visit the impressively portrayed Iwo Jima Memorial and the new Air Force Memorial, dedicated in October, 2006. Photographs don't do justice to either. I was especially impressed by the

size of the Air Force Memorial, the stainless steel spires of the main feature towering and shining 270 feet overhead. Friday evening we joined in the antics of TLCB VP John Sweet, playing the role of head auctioneer, as he and his assistants hawked all manner of items to the highest bidders, raising a substantial amount of money for the TLCB Assistance Fund to aid the children of Southeast Asia.

Saturday morning during the annual business meeting, election of officers was held and the reunion cities of 2012 and 2013 reunions were announced, San Antonio, TX and Ft Walton Beach, FL, respectively. The rest of the day provided welcome free time to relax and chat with our TLCB brothers and sisters. At the banquet, Mercy Diez, an active duty Sergeant Major with The US Army Band, "Pershing's Own," sang the National Anthem. She is a veteran of both Iraq and Afghanistan. Jeff Hudgens delivered a heartwarming slide presentation, highlighting the cooperation between his own charity and the TLCB Assistance Program. Jason Cain, Director of Outreach, and *The Wall That Heals* Program Manager at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, was the other guest speaker. Jason described the museum that will display artifacts left at The Wall over the years. The lucky winner of the TLC Sisterhood fundraising quilt raffle was a very grateful Thelma Tilton.

During closing ceremonies Sunday morning, the names of our deceased TLCB members were read and a bell rung in remembrance of each. Members offered additional remembrances for friends and family lost in the war. Afterward, we reluctantly said our goodbyes and departed for our own destinations, already looking forward to 2012. Yet another successful TLCB reunion is in the bag, but memories of the good times shared with our brothers will live on.



Woody Freeman played *Amazing Grace* on his bagpipes at the memorial wreath presentation near The Wall, and as shown here, at our final memorial service.

